



# *Student Wellbeing*

## Leading change and building capacity in schools

By Lina Di Paolo

Managing successful school change is a complex task. In the context of student wellbeing, effective change is underpinned by a school's capacity to contextualise wellbeing within a preventative framework and a whole-school approach. Within the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM), nurturing and developing a broad capacity base in student wellbeing reflects initiatives at both macro (systems) and micro (school) levels, which have been strategically aligned to complement each other. At a systems level, the Student Wellbeing Strategy Plan 2006–2010 is the engine which is driving innovation, informing best practice and transforming educational communities. At a local school level, student wellbeing coordinators (SWCs) have been instrumental in linking a range of wellbeing initiatives to the broader School Improvement Framework (SIF) agenda. Through collaborative processes and an evidence-based approach, SWCs are facilitating the development of a common understanding, a consistent approach and a shared commitment to wellbeing in Catholic schools.

### Credentialed learning

The central element of the Student Wellbeing Strategy Plan 2006–2010 is the provision of credentialed learning which seeks to build teacher capacity to support and improve student wellbeing. Through the Youth Services Strategy, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (CECV) has been offering sponsorship since 1999 in the Master of Education (Student Wellbeing) course at the University of Melbourne (see also the article on page 56). The Master of Education (Student Wellbeing) course promotes an understanding of the centrality of student wellbeing to positive educational and mental health outcomes. The course provides educational leaders, SWCs and teachers with an opportunity to develop and enhance their knowledge and skills to be better able to promote student wellbeing in schools at an individual and an organisational level. The Master of Education (Student Wellbeing) course prepares teachers to take a leadership role in the design, implementation and evaluation of student wellbeing policy, initiatives and practices.

Consistently, graduates who have completed the Master of Education (Student Wellbeing) course are able to:

- demonstrate a high degree of knowledge and understanding of educational theory and practice in the field of student wellbeing and its relationship to learning
- express informed opinions about the promotion of student wellbeing in education
- exhibit a detailed understanding of the theory and practice of educational research needed to evaluate research literature
- design, implement and evaluate research activities focusing on student wellbeing
- effectively use the findings of educational writings and research to formulate solutions to the challenges within the area of student wellbeing in education
- be a resource for colleagues in the area of the promotion of student wellbeing
- demonstrate an appreciation of the professional responsibilities and ethical principles associated with the promotion of student wellbeing that characterises them as leaders within the education profession.

At the end of 2008, approximately 880 teachers from across Victoria had completed credentialed learning in student wellbeing. Of these teachers, 70% have been in leadership positions such as principal, deputy principal, year-level coordinator, student wellbeing coordinator and faculty coordinator. Overall 60% of Catholic schools (82% secondary and 56% primary) have taken advantage of the credentialed learning strategy.



### Student Wellbeing Action Partnership (SWAP)

In addition to credentialled learning, the Student Wellbeing Action Partnership (SWAP) website <[www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/swap](http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/swap)> has continued to build systemic support in student wellbeing across Victorian primary and secondary schools. The website, developed in partnership between the Catholic Education Office Melbourne and the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, provides opportunities for teachers, school leaders and the wider education community to access reports on case studies of current wellbeing best practice initiatives in schools, as well as articles, research and resources about student wellbeing. SWAP provides a forum for current students of the Master of Education (Student Wellbeing) course to present research on matters related to wellbeing. The SWAP website also enables teachers in Catholic schools to participate in online forums to share information and ideas with other teachers.

### Student wellbeing coordinators

Since their appointment in 2006, student wellbeing coordinators (SWCs) have engaged in a comprehensive and coordinated range of activities to support and enhance their role within schools. SWCs work with a school-based core team to develop a whole-school approach to wellbeing. According to a CEOM Survey in May 2009, over 85% of SWCs are members of their school's leadership team. This facilitates links between wellbeing and the learning strands and domains, curriculum teams and parent and student bodies. The data also reinforce the importance and centrality of student wellbeing within the school community and the notion that 'wellbeing is everyone's business'.

The CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit facilitates two days of central professional learning for SWCs. This enables SWCs to network with each other, to share good practice and to develop skills and understandings relevant to their work. Each year an identified theme from the Student Wellbeing Strategy Plan 2006–2010 becomes the focus for professional learning. At the launch of the Student Wellbeing Coordinators Strategy in **2006**, Dr Helen Cahill and Elizabeth Freeman (the University of Melbourne) described the changing landscape within the field of student wellbeing. Their key message, which is reflected in much of the current research in wellbeing, suggested that schools were unlikely to improve student achievement and outcomes unless there was a key focus on wellbeing.

During **2007**, the area of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) was investigated. Sessions were facilitated by keynote speakers such as Professor Michael Bernard (the University of Melbourne) and Dr Toni Noble (Australian Catholic University, ACU), who emphasised that 'gaining the ability to understand our own emotions and using them to shape our own actions are competencies that are not only essential for our mental and emotional health: they are meta-abilities that are highly linked to school and career success' (Goleman, cited in Weare 2000, p. 69). Since 2007, the CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit has developed a variety of resources, including the recent publication, *SEL in Catholic School Communities: Guidelines for a Whole-school Sustainable Approach to Social and Emotional Learning* (2009).

In **2008**, Dr Sue Roffey (University of Western Sydney) explored the concept of positive psychology and wellbeing. Dr Roffey also set the scene for examining the role of SWCs as leaders and agents of change within school communities. This theme was further developed by Dr Annette Schneider RSM (ACU), who focused on the importance of engaging stakeholders in the decision-making and change process. Dr Schneider also emphasised the imperative of emotional intelligence, self-awareness and reflection in leading and sustaining change.

During **2009**, Sharon Butler, a Churchill Fellowship recipient in 2007, was engaged to facilitate the first professional learning seminar of the year. Her brief was to present an insight into the current evidence base for the value of school–family–community partnerships. Sharon's key message reinforced the view that when schools value and affirm partnerships with families and invest in developing meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships with the broader community they can positively alter school culture, stimulate self-growth among parents and carers, contribute to the building of social capital in the community and enhance the professional rewards for principals and school staff (DEEWR 2008).

### Student wellbeing coordinator clusters



The themes presented during SWC central professional learning sessions are explored and unpacked through regionally based Student Wellbeing Coordinator Cluster meetings, which are convened each term. SWC clusters aim to:

- raise awareness of key student wellbeing and educational initiatives to enable SWCs to make informed decisions and take action within their school communities
- develop and strengthen collegiality and networking opportunities among SWCs
- model and enrich the process of mutual learning among members
- identify and build on the SWC cluster members' priorities to address focus areas.

Each SWC cluster appoints a convenor, who liaises with CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit staff to prepare an agenda for each meeting. Convenors and CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit staff maintain an overview of SWC cluster developments, issues and trends. Cluster convenors often act as informal mentors and buddies to newly appointed SWCs. By encouraging participation and strengthening networking among SWCs, cluster convenors have enhanced the exchange and sharing of information. In turn, this collegial support has advanced the implementation of student wellbeing initiatives in schools.

### Promoting a culture of wellbeing within Catholic school communities

The CEOM Student Wellbeing Strategy Plan 2006–2010 has developed a strong culture of wellbeing within Catholic school communities. At its core, the CEOM Student Wellbeing Strategy Plan 2006–2010 is committed to continuous and sustainable school improvement. Through the development of inclusive policies that promote holistic, student-centred practices, wellbeing is recognised as an integral aspect of curriculum development and pedagogy. Are we there yet? Not quite! It will continue to take collective wisdom and courage to transform understandings and practices, so that student wellbeing is at the heart of teaching and learning.

### References

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2008, *The Family–School Partnerships Framework*, accessed 20 February 2009  
<[www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/Family\\_School\\_Partnerships\\_Framework.htm#publication](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/Family_School_Partnerships_Framework.htm#publication)>.
- Weare, K 2000, *Promoting Mental, Emotional and Social Health: A Whole-school Approach*, Routledge, London.

**Lina Di Paolo** is Education Officer (Youth Services) in the Student Wellbeing Unit at the Catholic Education Office Melbourne..